

## ‘QUO VADIS’ NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*The present reflection on the state of New Testament scholarship takes place against the background of a strong resurgence of religion on a global scale. This does not imply that New Testament studies can continue as usual. A critical re-examination is needed to ensure that the discipline continues to play a meaningful role in the future. Rather than undertaking a comprehensive review, certain distinctive topics are highlighted: the importance of the original languages, the alternative as point of departure, a historical consciousness, an inclusive approach and an ethics of the deed. The article is concluded with some suggestions for restructuring the curriculum of theological training and for deepening the concept of human dignity.*

**Keywords:** New Testament studies, Biblical Languages, Theological Curriculum, Human Dignity

### Introductory Remarks

The question ‘Quo vadis New Testament?’ might imply a comprehensive survey of the discipline and/or a forecast of future trends. For the former, *Theologische Rundschau* and *New Testament Abstracts* would be much more suitable sources and for the latter, it would be very foolhardy to try to predict in which way New Testament studies will (or even worse, *should*) develop. The few remarks that follow here, are of a much more modest nature. It is an attempt to stimulate further discussion by reflecting on a few key issues and to respond to the request of the organizers to focus on two topics: the potential contribution of the discipline to the theme ‘human dignity’ and the possible implications this might have for rethinking the curriculum of theological study. From a personal perspective, I would like to highlight some core concerns that might have an effect on the future development of the discipline.

It is important to bear in mind that our present discussion takes place in a time when – contrary to the confident expectations of classical secularization theory – we are witnessing the growth of religion and religiosity on an unprecedented scale (see for example Graf 2004, Taylor 2007, Micklethwait & Wooldridge 2009). The implications of this global phenomenon are still not clear. However, it would be a serious mistake to assume that we are now back to ‘business as usual’ and that doing theology and training a new generation of scholars can continue uninterrupted in the traditional way. Views on religion and religious discourse have changed substantially, making the re-thinking of New Testament studies as a discipline and of religion as such (and not just Christian theology) an urgent task.

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<sup>1</sup> First editor of *Scriptura*.

## The Specific Contribution of the New Testament and of New Testament Scholarship

As one of the theological disciplines New Testament studies of course shares many of the challenges that other disciplines, especially Old Testament studies, have to face. There is therefore no need to repeat what has already been mentioned and what will no doubt follow when the other disciplines are discussed. It might be more helpful to concentrate on the particular character of the New Testament and the specific contribution it could make to theological scholarship as a whole.

To start with a self-evident observation: We can expect that in 150 years from now New Testament scholarship will be *different*. But different in what way? There seems to be a number of 'constants' we have to keep in mind. For instance – the canon of 27 books will in all probability remain as it is. This is not to deny that this relative small corpus of texts is not linked to a whole network of other texts (before, during and after the formation of the New Testament) that are essential for their interpretation, nor that the canon is closed in principle (the debate on the different variations of the canon still continues). It is nonetheless unlikely that we shall see great changes in this respect. Another 'constant' is the medium through which the New Testament is transmitted. We know that it was preceded by an oral phase, but at the moment we are dealing with an 'inscripturated' version. Of course the medium can change and we are surrounded by an ongoing stream of oral, visual and audio variations. But New Testament scholarship has its origins in the study of the *written* text and this shaped the discipline in a specific way right from the start. Ricoeur has made it clear what the consequences of 'inscripturation' are for the process of interpretation (cf. Ricoeur 1976) and New Testament scholarship will have to keep this in mind also in its future development (cf. Lategan 2009a).

As far as the medium of the New Testament is concerned (that is, its linguistic format), we are both in a good and a not so good position. South African New Testament scholarship is characterized by its extraordinary attention to methodology and over the years it has built up a well-equipped arsenal of methods and hermeneutical approaches. This is well illustrated by the compendium *Focusing on the message* that has just been published with Andre du Toit as editor (see Du Toit 2009). It has been said – and not entirely without justification – that South African New Testament scholars suffer from method-addiction. The fact is that local New Testament scholars and students are well served in this regard and that the focus on the medium of the New Testament enables a constant influx of new insights from linguistics and from literary theory – to the advantage of New Testament exegesis itself. The more instruments we learn to play, the richer the music will hopefully be that is produced.

Unfortunately, there is also a downside. The pressure to reduce the time allocated to the study of the original languages in the theological curriculum continues and even increases. Unfortunately this is often done on the basis that it will promote greater access to theological training. This is a flawed argument for several reasons. Firstly, experience has shown that language requirements do not necessarily restrict access. Secondly (and more importantly), cutting back on the study of original languages does impair other forms of access: access to a proper understanding of how the message of the New Testament is structured and access to the world of the New Testament itself. Without a thorough knowledge of sentence and discourse structures (something that that no longer forms part of the school curriculum) no responsible exegesis is possible. Without access to the text corpus of the First Century (of which the New Testament forms an integral part), no real grasp can be expected of the theological, social, economic, and political context that is so

essential for the understanding of the New Testament. I am not aware of attempts to eliminate mathematics from the curriculum for engineers nor of calls to eliminate anatomy from the medical curriculum. Why then the pressure to scale down the study of the original languages when preparing future generations of biblical scholars?

There is an even more fundamental reason why the ‘detour’ via the original languages is so important for the (re)discovery of the New Testament. Ricoeur has made clear that the inscription of events has the important consequence of distancing and alienation (cf. Lategan 2009a: 74-76). One of the enduring problems of biblical message is its ‘over-familiarization’. Through endless repetition, centuries of interpretation, re-interpretation, and translation the message has become almost completely domesticated. The attempt to let scripture speak ‘here and now’ has – ironically – rendered the message in many respects almost indistinguishable in our present context. We urgently need the experience of alienation via the original languages to understand again how ‘strange’ the Palestine of the first century really was and how different the world and New Testament message was in order to rediscover its true contours for ourselves and for a new context.

There is also a psychological issue involved. One often hears the well-intended but misplaced argument for cutting back that we should not make it too difficult for our students, implying they do not really have what it takes to master these languages. This is at best a motion of no confidence in their abilities (an assumption that is consistently proven wrong in actual practice) and at worst a barely disguised expression of paternalism.

Of course the study of the original languages should be appropriate to the level of training. We expect from our post-graduate and especially doctoral candidates something different from what we expect from students who are preparing for the ministry. But also for the latter new electronic resources are becoming available on an ever increasing scale (e.g. the TLG project) coupled with various kinds of online support that enable students to deal confidently with basic concepts in the text and to reach an informed judgement regarding the meaning of a passage.

As far as post-graduate students are concerned, there are interesting possibilities like the ‘graduate college’ proposed by Cilliers Breytenbach and others. The existing New Testament seminars make an important contribution in this regard. No aspiring scholar can expect to make his or her mark on the international New Testament scene without a through training in the basic disciplines.

The focus on the medium of the New Testament thus remains important, but we need to return to the substance of the New Testament. Our colleagues from other theological disciplines and the wider faith community quite rightly expect from us to make clear what the particular contribution is that the New Testament can offer to the theological enterprise as a whole. More specifically – in terms of the request of the organizers – what the discipline can contribute to the topic of human dignity and to possible changes to the curriculum. This expectation does not concern the basic information regarding the life and work of Jesus and the gospel of salvation. This forms the substance of all theological disciplines. But what is the distinctive contribution of the New Testament to theological reflection and discourse in general? I would like to highlight to four concepts or areas of thought.

#### **Four Areas of Thought**

##### *The Alternative as Point of Departure*

The Sermon on the Mount represents a pivotal point in biblical tradition. The structure is paradoxical – contrary to normal expectations and contrary to the value system of the day,

the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, those who hunger for justice, the peacemakers, and the persecuted are declared blessed. The formulation is oppositional: 'You have heard that it was said...', 'but I tell you ...'. In the *ego de lego* the 'evangelical alternative' is articulated. In fact, in the *de* encapsulates the whole of the gospel message.

In contrast to the theology of the day (bolstered by verbatim citations from the Torah: 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth...'), Jesus presents an alternative possibility to deal with the situation. The received tradition is thus not only subject to critique, but also lacking in essential aspects. The dogma of retaliation (what harm you do to me, I shall – with all justification – pay you back) provides the basis of all forms of violence between individuals and between communities. This is not only typical of the tradition preceding the New Testament, but appears – in different guises – in many other religious traditions and communities. The principle of revenge is not only one of the underlying causes of wars, but also forms the basis of countless family and community feuds. In some cases these feuds continue seemingly unstoppable and claims the lives and possessions of other with relentless regularity. Even worse – it is a tragedy that plays itself out on a daily basis in our very midst between family members. In the international arena, Iraq and Afghanistan are contemporary examples of the same principle at work, with the Middle East as perhaps the most intractable case. As long as the retaliation paradigm retains the upper hand, there is little prospect of an enduring peace. The same reality could have been our lot if Mandela and De Klerk did not in the end opt for a negotiated settlement.

In word and deed Jesus personifies an alternative possibility to deal with injustice – a possibility the New Testament as discipline needs to keep alive at all costs. Retaliation and violence are the opposites of reconciliation. And – as Jaap Durand continues to remind us – the idea that people are in principle irreconcilable is the mother of all apartheid theology.

'You have heard that it was said – but I tell you' therefore not only signifies an alternative way to deal with injustice, but is at the same time the expression of a critical consciousness that does not accept a given situation at face value. This implies that no tradition, no authority – religious (scribes) or secular (Caesar) – per definition is unassailable or above criticism. This point of departure also forms the basis of all alternative ways of reading of the biblical text, of reading against the grain – be it from a gender, liberation, postcolonial, or postmodern perspective. This basic attitude has assumed many different forms over time – it is articulated for example in the well-known *sola* formulations of the Reformation, but it can also to be found in unexpected and counter traditions, like the Marxist concept of a 'false consciousness'.

The alternative implied by the 'you have heard, but' formulation is not only a criticism of retaliation and violence, but forms part of a much more comprehensive reversal of values whereby the first will be the last, the last first, where death precedes life, where whoever wants to be great must become a servant, where your enemy is to be loved, not hated, and where the marginalized become the center of attention. No wonder that some consider the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount as impracticable and that Jesus has been portrayed on occasion as a revolutionary. As a critical alternative to the values of the day, his message does indeed have revolutionary implications. It should remain an important goal of theological training to develop such a critical consciousness and the ability to interpret the current situation in terms of these alternative values.

Pursuing alternatives are closely related to a second characteristic of the New Testament, namely understanding its own historicity and dealing with change.

*Historicity and Dealing with Change*

An important impetus behind the changes we are witnessing in the New Testament as discipline is due to its own historical nature (*Geschichtlichkeit*). This corpus of texts is historical in a two-fold sense: it relates historical events, but it is in itself the outcome of a historical process. This affects the interpretation and understanding of the New Testament, but it is also the reason why the study of these documents changes over time. It represents the other side of the pursuit of alternatives. The New Testament reflects the changes of audience and of the circumstances of its own time, but also narrates the expansion of the church in the Greek-Roman world of the first century. But it also shows points to a way to deal with change as an essential dimension of the gospel.

The exploration of this possibility takes place between on the one hand an a-historical approach to the New Testament that still persists in some circles and on the other hand a positivistic concept of history that also lingers on.

The former usually takes the form of the equation of the present with the world of the New Testament, while the latter is an anachronism in a post-modern world in its quest for 'reality' behind historical events.

Appreciation of the historicity of the New Testament can assist in overcoming the fears associated with change, but also in moving beyond the restrictions of a positivistic understanding of history. The latest work of Breytenbach on remembering (following Ricoeur) opens interesting perspectives in this regard. It also creates space to explore both the strengths and the weaknesses of alternative strategies of interpretation – the recent interest in 'postcolonial criticism' is a case in point (see Moore & Segovia 2005). It furthermore promotes a better grasp of diversity and pluriformity – or rather, of the complexity that is such a prominent feature of our current situation.

At the same time we need to find a sensible way between the Scylla of a hermeneutics of suspicion that can result in cynicism and the Charybdis a rigid fundamentalism that resists all change. We need a critical consciousness that does not lead to resignation, but to the discovery of new possibilities and for the appreciation of complementary perspectives. In line with the Sermon on the Mount, the need is for a 'hermeneutics of the alternative'.

*The Search for Inclusiveness*

A third characteristic of the New Testament is the gradual, but in the end inexorable movement towards greater inclusiveness – in contrast to the dominant paradigm of exclusion in the pre-New Testament period.

The option for inclusiveness also has its origins in the Sermon on the Mount with the reversal of the 'natural' tendency to love neighbors and hate enemies. It is replaced by the outrageous suggestion that enemies should be loved and that one should pray for one's persecutors 'so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven' (Mat. 5:45). These sons should emulate the example of the Father who 'causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous' (5:45). A more inclusive redefinition of what it means to be 'children of God' is hardly possible. What is at stake is a concept of righteousness that goes beyond the normal practice of being civil and fair to members of the own group. It transcends conventional opposites and crosses existing boundaries in order to achieve an inclusiveness that was formerly unconceivable.

Inclusivity forms an important element of a new understanding of righteousness of which Jesus himself becomes the personification (see in this regard Lategan 2009b: 86-90). The implications of this approach was not immediately clear. During Jesus' own ministry, the emerging movement stayed very much within Jewish parameters. Even in the first

phase after Pentecost, Peter and his fellow apostles are – according to Acts – directing their message to ‘all of Israel’ (Acts 2:36). Their persecution is portrayed as an inner-Jewish matter. It is instigated by the high priest and his associates and Stephen’s death is sanctioned by the Sanhedrin. It was only with the outbreak of the general persecution in Jerusalem that the movement begins to spread to other regions of Judea and Samaria and finally enters the wider Hellenistic world. It is at this stage that questions of inclusion become acute. Peter is faced with the dilemma whether he should associate with a gentile, even if he and all of his family were ‘devout and God-fearing’ (Acts 10:1). A three-fold vision was needed to overcome his scruples to enter the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:9-29). But once these gentiles received the Spirit, nothing can hold Peter back to baptize them. Nonetheless, he had to explain his actions to his brothers in Jerusalem. It was only after hearing that this gentile family received the same gift of the Spirit like they did that the objections fell away and the conclusion is reached: ‘So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life’ (Acts 11:18).

Realities on the ground thus forced a fundamental rethink of existing theological positions. No one played a more decisive role in this process than Paul. The former persecutor of the church was destined from beginning to fulfill a wider mission ‘before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel’ (Acts 9:15). And yet, he almost invariably made the local synagogue the starting point of his ministry (Acts 13:4, 14; 17:2). It is only when he meets with opposition from the side of the Jews like in Antioch and Thessalonica that he shifted his focus more specifically to the gentiles – with great success. Those who were (according to customary theological thinking) excluded from God’s gift of salvation are those who most ardently accept the message of the apostle. The power of an inclusive approach is thus demonstrated not by theological principles, but by people who ‘vote by their feet’ as it were, by outsiders and gentiles who accept the message of salvation without hesitation. It is this new reality that forces a reassessment of accepted doctrine and that triggers new and innovative theological thinking about what really constitutes the church.

History in this sense overtakes theology. The influx of non-Jewish believers rendered long-treasured positions obsolete and necessitated a re-examination of basic premises of traditional Jewish thinking. It is very typical of Paul’s way of doing theology that he does not abandon the tradition in which he stands, but that he goes back to its very roots. The central position of the Covenant and of the Torah in the history of Israel cannot be denied. He is forced to retrace the trajectory of the special and privileged position of Israel to its origins. Has he missed something? What was prior to the Torah? This leads him to the figure of Abraham. In him Paul discovers some one who at the time of his calling is uncircumcised, that is, living without the Torah. His righteousness results from faith, not from being circumcised (which he was not). He is the father of all who believe, circumcised or uncircumcised (Romans 4:11-12). Faith is the only requirement for inclusion in the family of God. Paul thus opens up a previously obscured or forgotten route for Gentiles to identify directly with Abraham and to claim with full justification that they are true descendants of the patriarch. The original universalistic trajectory is reclaimed and the promise of God to Abraham fulfilled: ‘All nations will be blessed through you’ (Gal. 3:9).

This new insight has consequences for a much wider set of social relations – all of which is linked to the issue of inclusion and exclusion. In redefining the position of the Gentiles, Paul is not only dealing with the relationship of the Galatians to the Jewish tradition, but also with the way in which the alternative view of reality that he is proposing affects other social relationships. In this regard his programmatic statement in Gal. 3:26-28 is of fundamental importance: ‘You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all

of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave of free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’.

Paul thus laid the groundwork for a theology of inclusion (see Lategan 2009b). Unfortunately, in the subsequent history of the church the full unfolding of an inclusive approach was hampered by a constant falling back in the mindset of exclusion. The same argumentation, the same unedifying process is repeated every time faith as the only qualification for belonging to the community is burdened by additional requirements for membership. In the case of the Dutch Reformed Church the racial qualification for belonging to a specific church and the theological justification of apartheid was eventually relinquished, but not without a long and painful process which caused untold harm to individuals and communities alike. Confession, retraction, and apology for misinterpreting and abusing scripture were unavoidable to make a new beginning possible. The same process repeated itself with regard to the position of women in the church – first exclusion from leadership and office, then the reluctant concession to allow women as deacons, then as elders and eventually as pastors. Again the acknowledgement of misinterpreting scripture. A similar trend can be seen with regard to sexual orientation and to the Belhar confession. At this stage the church is divided on the issue of gay people as office bearers. And Belhar remains unacceptable for a large number of members – ironically not because of its content, but because of its origins and its alleged political connotations. The end result seems to be predictable – admission over time that current positions are untenable, apology for the pain caused – and the (reluctant) acceptance of gay people and of the Belhar confession?

What is disheartening – and the DRC is certainly not the only denomination plagued by these problems – is the tenacity of the exclusivist mindset and the apparent inability to finally break free of an outdated paradigm. The thrust of the inclusive trajectory through the many phases of the history of salvation and of the church points in a different direction.

#### *An Ethics of the Deed*

A fourth distinctive contribution that the New Testament offers is a better understanding of the dialectic between theological conceptualization and historical reality. We have seen above how the reality of the (unexpected) acceptance of the gospel by gentiles forced Paul to reconsider (and change) his theological assumptions and his ingrained prejudice. Conversely, new theological insights can challenge believers to act in terms of these new insights, thereby creating new realities. The Galatians have been made free – they should therefore act in a liberated way. The test for Filemon is to accept Onesimus’ new status as brother in faith and act towards him accordingly. In this sense the New Testament implies an ‘ethics of the deed’.

### **Some Suggestions**

#### *Rethinking the Theological Curriculum*

The crowding of the curriculum with theological disciplines at the expense of other subjects in the humanities, has done theological training a disservice. The old Catholic two-tier model which begins with a grounding in philosophy before moving to theology and the earlier custom at this faculty of a first degree in the humanities before starting with theology proper, had many advantages. Ministers and theologians cannot be expected to function effectively in a postmodern world without a thorough exposure to the thinking informing this world, to the way society is structured and how it functions, and to the way it

expresses itself in art and literature. It is important to find creative ways to widen this narrow focus to the benefit of ministers who must serve in a new time.

Secondly, the critical importance of the original languages of the Bible has already been emphasized in section 2, together with suggestions how to make it a functional part of the curriculum on both undergraduate and postgraduate level. As far as the latter is concerned, specialized high-level training is needed to nurture the next generation of New Testament scholars. The existing doctoral seminars can be further developed as a graduate school with international participations along the lines as suggested by Cilliers Breytenbach. Specialization at this level should have a decidedly interdisciplinary character to include contributions from historiography, linguistics, literary theory, philosophy and sociology. Without dedicated, specialized training of this kind it will not be possible to participate at an international level and contributing to the development of New Testament studies as a whole.

*Contributing to the Topic, 'Human Dignity'*

All four areas of thought discussed above have implications for the concept of human dignity.

- A critical consciousness with regard to tradition, structures of authority and the abuse of power in itself provides an important bulwark against the forms of absolutism and ideological constructs intended to subject human dignity to other interests, to the exercise of power or to some 'grand plan'. A critical consciousness is at the same time an antidote to the over-estimation of man and the hubris that goes with it.
- A historical consciousness not only helps to allay fears of change, but also helps to develop the ability to deal with complexity and uncertainty – so typical of the 'human condition' at present. It also reminds us of the need to critically reflect human dignity has to be reconsidered and to give it concrete content in each new situation and context.
- The challenge to think in an inclusive way about the community of faith has far-reaching implications for the widening of the concept 'human dignity', including the acceptance of the 'ontological' reality of being rather than a restricted understanding of humanity based on conditions and criteria.
- The ethics of the deed changes 'human dignity' from a concept to reality.



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